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ABSTRACT

The twentieth century history of the academic study of political communication can be divided into three parts: the period between the World Wars, the period 1940-1965, and the period from 1965 to the present. In the first period, social scientists were greatly concerned that the democratic process might be subverted by propaganda; they were interested more in pragmatic social action than in theorizing. In the second period, a more complicated theory was adopted--the limited-effects model of political communication. This model depicted political communication as synonymous with political persuasion, especially in elections. The third and most recent approach is based on this limited-effects model, but changes and emphasizes features of the communication process. It stresses the participation of the audience, such as their communication behavior, and especially emphasizes the rediscovered uses and gratification approach. (DF)

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A Critique of Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Political Communication

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CS502 180

A Critique of Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Political Communication

Keith R. Sanders*

I see my role at this conference as one of putting things in perspective. Although the theme of this "track" centers on political imagemaking, that aspect of the emerging field of political communication is but one of the many topics with which academics have been concerned. Imagemaking is an important topic, and I don't mean to slight it. However, because other participants are addressing it from at least three different perspectives, I have chosen to take a broad, critical look at three distinctive stages in the development of political communication theory, beginning with the period between the World Wars and concluding with the exciting new initiatives which have been undertaken in the last decade. Covering this considerable span of time and cognitive space, in the time available, will require some rather broad brushstrokes. I ask, in advance, for your indulgence. I attempt this feat because I believe that the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary theorizing and research can be best understood in context.

To limit somewhat the scope of the task, I have chosen to omit all but passing reference to the contributions of Speech Communication scholars. This decision should not be taken as disregard for the work of such persons as Bormann (1973), Swanson (1973), and Simons (1972), who have made advances in the state of the art. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of the fact that most persons attending this conference will be better acquainted with the Speech Communication literature than with the political science and mass communication studies on which I will focus. I have also chosen to omit any discussion of the research methods used by the scholars whose work I cite. Those interested in the methods used by Speech Communication scholars should consult a recent article by Trent (1975). An extensive bibliography and guide to the literature on political campaign communication was recently published by Kaid, Sanders, and Hirsch (1974) and partially updated by Kaid and Sanders (1976).

Broadly speaking, the twentieth century history of the academic study of political communication can be divided into three parts, each exhibiting distinguishing characteristics. These three periods are the years between the World Wars, the period from the early 1940's through 1965, and the decade from 1965 to the present.

Social scientists, during the period between the Wars, were greatly concerned lest the democratic process be subverted by persuaders such as

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Mussolini, Hitler, Huey Long, and Father Coughlin.* Most important among the writers of the day were Doob (1935) and the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (1939). The "hypodermic needle" model articulated by these writers exhibited six charactersitics:

1. They were more interested in social-action than in theory building. Particularly, they were concerned that the body politic would be swayed by totalitarian advocates to the extent that participatory democracy would be undermined.

2. They had great faith in the effectiveness of rational analysis and explanation. While Father Coughlin and Huey Long were to be feared because of their potential for evil, social scientific research on political communication, of a largely non-quantitative nature, could produce insights which would enlighten and make the audience less vulnerable to the illogic of propagandists. The problem of how the liberating fruits of social scientific research would be communicated to the masses was never confronted seriously.

3. These researchers assumed an exceedingly gullible, large, and captive audience. It was presumed that the defenses of an earlier time when newspapers and interpersonal communication were the major channels of communication had been rendered inoperative by radio. It was easier to resist tyrannical forces sitting around a cracker barrel talking to one's friends than listening to Huey Long on radio. In the latter circumstance, Huey Long had no competition.

4. The audience was regarded as atomistic (Katz, 1964). It was assumed that the power of propaganda was singular and direct, and that it was in no way mitigated by social or cultural interaction. It was apparently assumed by these writers that, while families and friends listened to the radio together, they were disinclined to discuss what they heard. Or, if there were such exchanges, they were assumed to have little or no effect on the beliefs and attitudes of the listener.

5. The power of political persuasion lay in content variables. In a manner similar to the neo-Aristotelian rhetorical critic, the propaganda analyst held the view that by writing sufficiently clever messages employing the seven techniques of name calling, glittering generality, etc. (it is no coincidence that the seven propaganda techniques were the same in number as the seven deadly sins) one could be an exceedingly effective and dangerous propagandist. Largely unnoticed by Doob and his colleagues was the fact that the seven deadly techniques could be found to one degree or another in the rhetoric of all the persuaders of the day, including those who spoke strongly in defense of classical democratic ideals.

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*This early period has been summarized well by Sears and Whitney (1973). Four of the characteristic mentioned here are also discussed by them. See also Defleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975).

6. The propaganda analyst was preoccupied with the short term effects of communicated messages to the exclusion of long term effects. It is ironic that his concern was for the long term stability of the democratic process, but that his research tended to concentrate on short term stimuli such as the speeches of Father Coughlin. This unfortunate tendency persists to the present day.

Although the perspective summarized above was widely held in pre-World War II academic circles, it began to give way to a different and more complicated school of thought by the early 1940's. This point of view has come to be called the "limited effects model"* of political communication. Chief among the works which articulated it were two classic studies of voting behavior: The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign by Larzarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948), and Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954). It should be noted, however, that what was regarded as hypothesis in these volumes moved toward the status of law by the time Joseph Klapper published The Effects of Mass Communication (1960). Klapper must be regarded as the Moses of the limited effects model. He wrote in stone what Berelson and his colleagues had written in sand. The distinguishing characteristics of the "limited effects model" are summarized by Blumler and McLeod (1974). With some elaborations and additions of my own, they are as follows:

1. The limited-effects theorist viewed the study of political communication as synonymous with the study of political persuasion. Political communication was seen as a series of linearly related events set in motion by persuaders, largely candidates for office, who encoded messages and sent through channels to influence the attitudes of the electorate. With no ill-motives, and almost unconsciously, the political communication researcher was the hand maiden of status quo political persuaders. It was almost as if the researcher were standing looking over the shoulder of the persuader, and with tunnel vision, describing the immediate effects of messages, while whispering correctives into the ear of the persuader.

Such a perspective reduced dramatically the number of independent, interviewing, and dependent variables which could be studied. And, of course, the one set of variables most neglected were audience or receiver variables. Early political communication research was interested in the audience only insofar as it was the object of persuasion. Until the early sixties, there were few studies which show any interest in the audience per se.

This relatively simple interpretation of political communication did not, as one might have expected, produce a simple life for communication researchers. The opposite occurred. For, while their surveys seemed

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*Two interesting reactions to this model may be found in McCombs (1972) and McLeod and Brown (1975).

to show only limited communication effects, others were producing significant change in experimental settings. Hovland and his colleagues (Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield, 1949; Hovland, 1954) were demonstrating that films produced for the Army weren't doing a very good job of changing attitudes about military service, but were, at least, producing large information gains. While learnings was not the major objective of the films, at least something was happening in the laboratory. Unfortunately, Berelson and his colleagues did not gain an active interest in the largely cognitive outcomes of experimental research on persuasion. Had they done so, they would have expanded their view of communication and would have increased the heuristic value of their work.

2. A second characteristic of the research done during this period is that almost all of it was conducted in campaign settings. This, too, acted as a restrain on its breadth. Campaigns have beginnings and endings. In a limited sense, their success or failure can be judged by the answer to the question "which candidate won?". They are usually conducted in environments in which there are competing communication stimuli from the "other side" and where there are strong pre-existing forces such as the influence of party affiliation. These conditions delimit and change the influences which communication can produce. At any rate, non-campaign settings were neglected.

3. A third distinguishing characteristic of this period was its view that communication served an exclusively reinforcing function. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues confidently asserted that political persuasion was important primarily because it activated latent predisposition, and thereby cast political messages into a minor role in the total scheme of things. Political communication was, it was thought, incapable of producing major shifts in attitude and unimportant insofar as value and behavior were concerned. Political persuasion was recreative rather than a creative phenomenon. Political campaigns, even though they occurred with predictable regularity, did not change broad political perceptions. Campaigns did not create new expectations and, unfortunately for the researchers of the day, they didn't seem to change attitudes much either.

No group of men as capable as Lazarsfeld and his colleagues could go long without some intellectually satisfying explanation as to why political persuasion seemed to have limited effects. So, they, as good theorists are supposed to do, invented a "law" to explain their lack of success--necessity being the mother of invention. Now this was no ordinary law. By the early 1960's it became a statement of the natural ordering of things. The law of which I speak was, of course, the principle of selective exposure.

4. A religious belief in the principle of selective exposure was a fourth distinguishing characteristic of the limited effects model. Although the limited effects researcher had little understanding of or regard for the mass political audience, he nevertheless believed that it engaged in motivated selective exposure to information consistent with its preconceptions and actively avoided information discrepent with pre-existing views. As Lazarsfeld et al (1948, p.90) put it, "voters turn to propaganda which affirms the valididty and wisdom of their original

decision." By 1960, as Freedman and Sears (1965) point out, this hypothesis had gained the status of law and was accepted as one of the few truisms which social scientific research had produced.

The unfortunate effect which such widespread acceptance of selectivity had on theory building was that it provided an easy answer to a complex question. Alas, it was the audiences' fault that well constructed, well-intended attempts at political persuasion failed. The audience would simply not pay attention to discrepant information. Therefore, attitude change was nearly impossible. Audiences, as we all know, were in search of that blissful state variously called balance, congruity, or consonance. (As we will see later, the diminution of selectivity from the status of law to the status of variable opens the way for a broadened set of theoretical explanations.) However, the acceptance of homeostatis theories of attitude change and the law of selective exposure were only two examples of a larger world view.

5. The limited effects theorists exhibited a strong belief in the essential stability of the political process. Most political attitudes and behaviors were the result of long-term socializing forces and were, therefore, thought to be relatively stable. Communication played no consequential role in socialization. Political campaigns were thought to be more the results of political inculturation and systemic necessity than the agents of inculturation.

Of all the stabilizing influences, one stood out constant and immutable--political party affiliation. Socialized by family and school, and reinforced by campaigns, it was the filter through which all political messages flowed. Thus, political communication was seen as a tiny stimulus in a world dominated by large social,cultural, and economic forces which were benevolently stabilizing. This period might be called the "Eisenhower Era" in the study of political communication.

There was one pesky group, however, which consistently failed to reinforce the world view of the limited effects theorists. This group of political deviates, variously called switchers, floating voters, or independents clearly had not been raised right. Somehow they had acquired the notion that one doesn't need party affiliation to participate in the political process. They would not follow predictable patterns. But this turned out to be less of a challenge than one might have expected. Research came to show that independents were so politically indifferent that they paid little attention to political messages and were therefore not really worth much attention by researchers. Independents continued to be bothersome, however, because their behavior was inherently inexplicable in terms of the limited effects model.

These then are the five distinguishing characteristics of limited effects political communication research as practiced through the early 1960's and is still in vogue in some places. At no point in this discussion do I mean to suggest disrespect for the scholars who implemented this model.

My criticism is of the model and of the way it grew and changed through ill-fated attempts to accommodate its shortcomings. Clearly, it was a product of its day, just as the point of view I shall now describe is the product of the late 1960's and early 1970's.

The new approach to the study of political communication which I now see emerging can be described best by contrasting it point by point with the limited effects model. In some cases it simply includes the study of effects and goes beyond. In others, it reduces what the effects scholar regarded as law to hypothesis, but in all instances it expands the theoretical horizons of research. The following summary of the new approach owes much to a recent interpretation by Blumler and McLeod(1974).

1. The first characteristic of the new approach is that it takes a broad view of the role communication plays in the political process, adding several dependent variables as appropriate objects of study. Whereas the limited effects scholar was interested largely in attitudinal change as a direct or indirect effect of political messages, scholarship of the last decade has added a variety of additional dependent variables* including cognition (Baker, et al, 1975), information gain (Chaffee, et al, 1970), perception (Wamsley and Pride, 1972), and voter turnout (Blumler and McLeod, 1974).

However, the most interesting new dependent variable is communication behavior itself. The limited effects model conceptualized communication behavior as the independent variable or cause of changes in attitude. The model which is getting more attention than any other is the rediscovered "uses and gratification" approach presented in a recent volume edited by Blumler and Katz (1974). This model posits communication exposure as a dependent function of underlying audience needs and motivations. The needs and gratifications model proceeds, according to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), from at least three assumptions which set it apart from other models:

a. The political audience is goal directed. It is motivated by psychological and social needs which result in a rather discriminating search for information. Information seeking activities are not explained by a need for balance or congruity but in terms of the perceived relevance or utility of the information sought.

b. Information sought and consumed is placed in proper cognitive and affective space. Information is used by the consumer in a fashion consistent with the needs which produced the search for it.

c. Media compete with other sources of need gratification. The media are not assumed to be either all powerful nor agents of minimal consequence. Media are assumed to be sources of information for some persons, some of the time, in some context.

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*For another interpretation of this shift in emphasis see McLeod and O'Keefe (1972).

The first book length study proceeding from this perspective was the report by Blumler and McQuail (1969) of their 1964 panal study of the British general elections. More recent applications include a study by Peled and Katz (1974) of the gratifications sought from various media during the Yom Kippur War in Israel, and the longitudinal study of voter behavior in Ohio conducted by Mendelson and O'Keefe (in press).

Critics have expressed several reservations about the theoretical value of the uses and gratifications approach, charging, among other things, that its major terms are ambiguous (O'Keefe, 1976), that it is sociologically naive (Elliot, 1974), that its intellectual underpinnings are contradictory (Swanson, 1976), and that it is essentially atheoretical, being more an "accounting system" than a theory (Rosengren, 1974). Notwithstanding these charges, the position represents a healthy departure from the constraints of the past and must be taken seriously.

2. A second distinguishing charactertistic of the new approach to the study of political communication can be found in its renewed attention to contextual covariables and its advocacy in favor of studies in non-campaign contexts. The research which has been done on Watergate and its aftermath began in a presidential campaign but continued after the campaign was officially concluded. The work of Simons, et al, (1973) has advanced our understanding of social movements and clearly transcends the political campaign orientation of previous research. One can hardly read a study on agenda-setting without encountering a call for non-campaign studies (McCombs, 1976).

A book which several colleagues and I are now preparing (Sanders, 1977) examines a single Congressman, his district, his campaigns, etc., from a variety of points of view. While the book is in the general tradition of campaign case studies, it is senstive to the constraints of context and, in fact, focuses on some of these constraints. It also attempts to employ a process rather than a linear model of political communication.

3. A third distinguishing characteristic of the new approach is its assertion that political communication plays a creative role in the political process. Political messages are no longer viewed as serving an entirely recreative or reinforcing function.

This observation obviously applies to the uses and gratifications approach which asserts that the interaction of psychological and social needs with media content results in certain gratifications which are unique. A better example, however, can be found in the work of McCombs (1976) and others as they conceptualize and do research on the "agenda setting function" of the mass media. These researchers contend that the mass audience experiences a need for orientation--a need to construct a cognitive map of the world that is manageable and that serves as a basis for decision-making. This need leads persons to engage in information seeking activities which make them susceptable to the agenda-setting influence of the

media. Because much reality is beyond our sensory mechanisms, we are forced to rely on the reportage of events, personalities, and issues as data upon which to build a cognitive map. Such reportage, it is argued, interacts with our need for orientation and establishes an agenda of important issues, sub-issues, and issue characteristics. The argument is often summarized by the following quotation from Cohen (1963) ". . .[The Press] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about."

This position is a marriage of the direct effects notion and the needs and gratifications position. The need which media gratify is a generalized need for orientation. The gratification--a new agenda item, or reorganized agenda, etc.--is a direct effect. The agenda setting model, as most often interpreted, posits no interviewing variables between media agenda and audience agenda. It does, however, refer to several contingent conditions affecting the efficacy and efficiency of the agenda setting function. The central point to be made here, however, is that audience agenda are viewed as having been created, not recreated, and not merely reinforced. A new agenda is a new and unique reordering of conceptual priorities as a direct consequence of media exposure. This kind of creative power is nowhere assigned to media influence by the limited effects theorists, partly because he focuses on attitudinal effects, and partly because the notion of information seeking was alien to his theoretical perspective. The agenda setting model is, at this writing, the singularly most heuristic notion in the emerging field of political communication studies.

4. A fourth characteristic of this new period lies in its repeal of the law of selective exposure. In a now classic article, Freedman and Sears (1965) analyzed the empirical literature in support of motivated, selective exposure and the evidence in opposition to it, arriving at the conclusion that no strong case had, in fact, ever been made for the proposition in spite of its wide spread acceptance. They found evidence for de fact to selectivity wherein persons were exposed more to sources which supported their point of view than to sources which did not, but this outcome could not be linked to homeostatic motivations. One alternative hypothesis, somewhat akin to the agenda setting hypothesis, which Freedman and Sears postulated was that some kinds of information are sought for their sheer utility, and not because of the psychological gratifications they bring. For example, some conservative Republican businessmen may read the Wall Street Journal, not because they are in search of a psychological masseuse, rather because they want to know and, perhaps, better understand the day to day events in the business and industrial community.

The essential point to be made here is that motivated selectivity has been reduced from law to hypothesis, and its deminuation has prompted alternative explanations which should broaden future research and theorizing.

5. A fifth characteristic exhibited by the new approach is its rejection of the view that the world is inherently a stable place. The limited effects researchers held the view that the electorate was under the influence of long-term stabilizing forces of cultural, economic, and historic origin. Thus, one would not expect mass communication to have much impact. The sine qua non of the stabilizing influences was political party affiliation. Those who did not vote in a manner consistent with their party affiliation were regarded as uninformed, political deviates.

However, the political deviates of the 1950's have grown in number, respectability, and influence. Political independents are now the second largest "party" in America. And, since 1952, we have witnessed a decline in the percentage of persons claiming party affiliation and in the power of party affiliation to direct voting behavior. (Dreyer, 1971-1972). In this country, the ticket splitter has emerged "a new force in American Politics," according to DeVries and Tarrence (1972) who have described well the perceived information exposure patterns of ticket-splitters. Unfortunately, they test not a single relationship in their model, assuming without evidence, that information consumption, particularly from the electronic media, accounts for a significant amount of variance in ticket splitting behavior. Atwood and Sanders (1975) could find few such direct relationships in the analysis of perceived information exposure, media believability, and ticket splitting. Nevertheless, while the motivations and causes of ticket splitting remain something of an enigma, it occurs with a regularity that gives ticket-splitters the balance of power in many elections.

In addition, Kraus (1973) has reminded us that mass communication was not included as a source variable in most political socialization research, that most major studies of political socialization were done prior to the advent of television, but, that on the basis of new evidence, there is reason to grant some socializing influence to mass media. The research of Atkin (1975) and others are beginning to document this influence. Mass communication may, therefore, be among the long-term, stabilizing and/or destabilizing forces at work in the political system. In any event, researchers of this decade do not preceed from a bias in favor of a classically stable political environment. They assume a degree of instability and change.

This paper has attempted the ambitious task of summarizing and discussing the theoretical implications of three periods in the contemporary intellectual history of the study of political communication. I have not meant to review all relevant literature, nor have I claimed that every researcher during each period exhibited all of the characteristics of his or her day. Indeed, there were persons who anticipated the current trends, and there are persons currently doing research out of the limited effects perspective. While the "cognitive map" I have drawn is certainly incomplete, I hope it helps provide context for the exciting theorizing and research which is currently being done.

FOOTNOTES

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